

Lincoln County Coalition
P. O. Box 391
Troy, MT 59935

March 29, 2007

Dear Montana State Legislature and Governor Schweitzer,

As many of you well know, Lincoln County has been beset by any number of economic setbacks over the last many years. For many years our unemployment rate has been the highest in the state. And yet there are exciting things happening in our county, with regard to economic and community development, new collaborative ventures between once-upon-a-time nemeses in the natural resource wars. A coalition formed by the leadership of various interest groups is particularly interested in doing what we can to revitalize the severely-compromised local wood products industry, and we can give you about 880,000 good reasons why we support Senate Bill 452, which is how many acres of industrial timberland exist in our county. Our last remaining independent mill, Chapel Cedar, is particularly interested in the support of value-added harvest from these lands.

Certainly, we are not anti-development in the county, but with management opportunities on public lands proceeding in diminishing and unpredictable ways, we view the possible acquisition and/or management of even a fraction of these industrial timberlands as a critical tool in helping us protect and revitalize the local place-based wood products industry, such as the sort that thrived here in the past. As you well know, preserving a wood processing infrastructure in this region is critical to helping our communities meet any number of goals, some of which go over and beyond economic development and include wildland-urban interface fire protection and wildlife management.

As well, our various memberships utilize many of these lands, and have done so traditionally, across the generations, for hunting and fishing, skiing, snowmobiling, ATV riding, and many other general purposes in addition to forestry. Many of these lands are vital to the fabric of Lincoln County--including wood product manufacturing--and we wish to help keep them in a productive and intact state. Perhaps a revenue-sharing pilot between the state and affected counties could be explored, as a method of rewarding or creating incentives for local natural-resource based communities desiring to make long-term choices in sustainable natural resource production rather than the short-term volatile liquidations that are currently taking Montana by storm.

Thank you for your leadership on this matter. Montanans of the future--in Lincoln County, and around the state--thank you for taking this action.

Sincerely,

Joel Chandler--Lincoln County Ridge Runners ATV Club
Doug Chapel--Owner, Chapel Cedar Mill
Wayne Hirst--Stewardship Forestry Contractor, Lincoln County
Robyn King--Executive Director, Yaak Valley Forest Council (YVFC) and RAC member
John Konzen--Lincoln County Commissioner and RAC member
Donna O'Neil--Libby Sno-Kats
Jerry Wandler--Troy Snowmobile Club
Rick Bass--Board Member, Yaak Valley Forest Council (YVFC)
Tim Linehan--Board Member, YVFC and Trout Unlimited, hunting/fishing guide and RAC



March 29, 2007

Representative Walter McNutt, Chairman
House Natural Resources Committee
Montana House of Representatives

RE: Senate Bill 452 (Working Forests, Ranches, Farms, and Watersheds Program)

Dear Representative McNutt and Members of the House Natural Resources Committee,

The Vital Ground Foundation is unable to attend your committee hearing on Senate Bill 452 – Working Landscapes Bill. However, we would like to submit this letter of support into the record.

Vital Ground is a land trust focused on the protection of crucial habitat for grizzly bears and the wildlife that share their landscapes. Although our organization is focused on wildlife habitat, we believe that our habitat conservation work directly benefits the human inhabitants of Montana as well. Healthy, biologically diverse ecosystems are critically important to our way of life in Montana – from both a work and recreational perspective.

Many Montana communities are experiencing significant conversion of working landscapes to subdivision and other development, profoundly changing the landscape and traditional uses.

- Montana is following national trends that indicate more than 44 million acres of private forestland will be sold over the next 25 years in this nation, and 10 million acres have traded hands over the last 3 years alone.
- More than 14,500 new subdivisions were approved by local governments in Montana over past 10 years, resulting in over 1.1 million acres of new development. Many of these occur on former forest or agricultural lands.
- Projections place 200,000 more people in Montana in the next 20 years, with over 100,000 more homes by 2025.

These land use and demographic changes have a profound impact upon Montana's communities.

- Loss of working lands diminishes wildlife habitat, access for hunting, fishing, and recreation, closure of snowmobile trails, impacts water resources, and changes the local economies.
- Local communities are losing the ranching, farming, and forestry way of life, affecting local economies, banks, stores and the work force.

This bill will provide flexibility for the state and local government to respond to communities concerned with these land use changes and to maintain land as working forests, ranches, farms and watersheds.

- This bill creates a statewide loan and grant based funding mechanism for protecting and maintaining working lands, including forest and agricultural lands that are actively and sustainably managed to produce goods and services.
- By investing state funds and developing partnerships in land conservation today, we have the opportunity to leverage more public and private money to protect working lands.
- State land management agencies have the opportunity to block up intermingled and fragmented ownership for more effective management and conservation of resources. For example, the Swan Valley inter-mix of private, federal, and state lands that creates issues with land management, access, and protection of wildlife and resource values.

This bill directly or indirectly benefits nearly every person in Montana.

- The forestry community benefits by keeping the most productive working forests producing timber. That means jobs to manage forests and wood products to keep sawmills running.
- The agricultural community benefits by keeping farms and ranches producing crops and livestock. That means jobs, family enterprises, and maintaining a way of life.
- The recreation community benefits by protecting access to those forests and agricultural lands that the public has relied on for generations to hunt, fish, hike, and ski.
- Counties benefit by leveraging local funding to protect open space, having a resource for land-use planning, and keeping money and products coming to local citizens and economies.
- The public benefits by protecting the lands that provide our natural resources, wildlife habitat, water resources, view sheds, and open spaces.

The Vital Ground Foundation enthusiastically endorses the concepts proposed in the Working Forests, Ranches, Farms, and Watersheds Program bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Respectfully,

Gary J. Wolfe

Gary J. Wolfe, Executive Director
The Vital Ground Foundation
Building T-2, Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804
406-549-8650
www.vitalground.org

CLARK FORK-PEND OREILLE CONSERVANCY

Idaho Office – P.O. Box 2123, Sandpoint, Idaho 83864

Montana Office – P.O. Box 104, Heron, Montana 59844

Phone: 208-263-9471

Email: robbmceagle@yahoo.com

Website: www.cfpoconservancy.org

“Helping landowners conserve farms, ranches, forestlands, rivers, lakes and wildlife habitat in Sanders County, Montana and Bonner County, Idaho.

March 29, 2007

Honorable Representative Walter Mc Nutt
Chairman
House Natural Resources Committee
Montana Legislature
Capitol Station
Helena, Montana 59601

Dear Chairman Mc Nutt and Members of the House Natural Resources Committee,

We request your support of SB 452, the “Working Forests, Ranches, Farms and Watersheds ” Bill. This bill would help conserve working timberlands, ranches and farms in Montana. It would help landowners who own land adjacent to streams and rivers to protect important watersheds.

Our conservation organization is a registered nonprofit land trust that works with private Montana landowners who own commercial forestlands, farms and ranches.

This bill would greatly help private landowners in Montana because it would provide financial incentives to help private landowners keep private working commercial lands in productive, traditional uses. The bill would provide the first ever flexible, broad-based state funding program to help willing landowners to permanently conserve a variety of working lands and watersheds.

Most of our work in Montana is focused on Sanders County. Sanders County, and all of Northwestern Montana, depends on the timber industry for a major portion of the economy. This bill would help private timberland owners keep vital forestlands in sustained yield production. This safeguards jobs for Montanans. It keeps money in the Montana economy. Preventing fragmentation of the timberlands keeps foresters employed and loggers logging. It provides the economic lifeblood of towns like Thompson Falls, Noxon, and Plains. In addition, the bill would encourage good conservation stewardship of those forests so they are healthy and sustainable.

This bill provides multiple benefits. By helping ranchers and farmers hold onto working agricultural operations, the bill also helps safeguard traditional recreational opportunities for citizens who, by permission of the landowners, are able to hunt or fish or just enjoy these private places. By helping landowners maintain their working lands, the bill will protect wildlife habitat. By helping landowners that own land in important watersheds, the bill would help to conserve rivers and streams.

The bill also contains an excellent provision that would help landowners pay for, or cost-share, some of the "up front" costs of land conservation. These up front costs include such things as title work on properties, land surveys, real estate appraisals, geologists' reports, and other necessary required technical prerequisites to complete a conservation easement or other protective mechanism on private property. Currently, there is no significant source of ongoing funding for these items. This can be a real problem for the landowners because the upfront costs can total from roughly \$13,000 to \$25,000(or more) for a single property for a single landowner. The lack of funding for this upfront work often can "kill" conservation project that otherwise would be feasible.

We believe this bill would greatly benefit rural landowners and all Montanans who care about keeping our traditional forestlands intact and our farms and ranches working and productive. There are many reasons to support SB 452. We urge your support of this important bill for Montana. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Robb Mc Cracken
Executive Director
Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Conservancy
208-263-9471